

UK Labour: Corbyn seeks accommodation with Blairites and big business

By Chris Marsden
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The first vote on Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) after the consolidation of a pro-Jeremy Corbyn majority was unanimous.

The NEC urged Haringey Council in London to abandon plans to privatise a vast swathe of public assets, including housing estates, under the multimillion-pound Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV). The scheme has met with massive local opposition and the deselection of numerous councillors associated with the project.

The unanimous NEC vote is an appeal to the Blairite leadership of the local council, led by Clare Kober, to bow to political realities. It is a call for a truce so that they and other Labour councillors and MPs do not face deselection battles that might reignite a civil war in the party that the Corbynites are seeking to quell.

This month three new NEC posts, created to reflect a trebling of the party's membership to almost 600,000, were all won by pro-Corbyn candidates including Jon Lansman, who heads Momentum, the campaign group that backed Corbyn's leadership bid.

Last year, Lansman prepared for his accession to office by expelling members of various pseudo-left groups from Momentum, leaving it under the control of forces grouped around Corbyn, including many Stalinists from the former Straight Left faction of the Communist Party.

The NEC "Lanslide" spurred apocalyptic warnings from right-wing forces in the party, churned out by the Murdoch press, of a cull of Corbyn's opponents and the party's transformation along Bolshevik lines.

"Jeremy Corbyn allies plot to oust 50 Labour MPs," declared the *Sunday Times*. "Corbyn's nationalisation plan is '£176bn gamble'," added the *Times*. "Jeremy Corbyn would rip our foreign policy to shreds," warned Daniel Finkelstein, asserting Corbyn's support for

Lenin's definition that "imperialism is the highest form of capitalism."

Others pointed to the underlying danger that gave rise to Corbyn's leadership and now near-control of the party. The *Financial Times* warned, "Labour is gaining increasing favour for its public-sector-dominated prescription for many of Britain's ills," especially in the aftermath of the collapse of the construction firm Carillion. It cautioned that "until others can rally a suitable defence ... Labour's message will continue to receive a hearing. Especially with disgruntled voters who are ready to be seduced by stirring anti-capitalist rhetoric."

With the minority Conservative government of Theresa May embroiled in factional warfare over Brexit so severe that there is talk of an imminent leadership challenge, the ongoing shift to the left among workers and young people raises fears in ruling circles of a Labour government elected on pledges to end austerity and curb business excesses.

In response, Corbyn and his allies are again seeking to reassure big business that they can be trusted to safely channel political and social opposition in a way that does not imperil the fundamental interests of British capitalism.

Replying directly to suggestions of a purge of right-wingers, Lansman gave an extensive interview to the *Independent*. Noting the witch-hunt of the left in the Labour Party in the 1980s, he reassured all concerned, "I don't want that to happen to anyone else, ever again ... I want an inclusive pluralist Labour Party that remains a coalition."

Regarding Momentum, he continued, "We have made it clear that we are not going to campaign to reselect anyone, at all, anywhere."

For the most part, the Blairites are minded to take

Lansman at his word. Without the numbers to mount a successful challenge, their focus for the moment is on extracting maximum concessions from Corbyn—especially regarding Labour’s stance on Brexit.

This is set out as the price for an accommodation between the Blairites and others within the Parliamentary Labour Party and local councils and the Corbyn leadership. Writing December 28 in the *Guardian*, Martin Kettle urged Corbyn to “create a Labour [Party] of all the talents.” Given the danger of a hard-Brexit under the Tories, “all those who reject the doctrinaire extremes” must recognise that the “national interest of preventing or softening Brexit should override any partisan anxiety about what a Jeremy Corbyn government might mean.”

He praised what he called a “ceasefire” in the Labour Party and urged that this be “the shape of things to come.” Not all “Momentum members are machine-obsessed sectarians,” he added, while “so far, there is little evidence of a systematic attempt to purge the centrists and social democrats.”

Writing again on January 11, Kettle acknowledged that “Jeremy Corbyn’s dilemma is real”: the party is pro-Remain, but it cannot afford to lose anti-Brexit voters and still win an election. He urges Remainers to focus on ensuring “Britain’s trading relationship with the EU after Brexit” and its relationship with Ireland. “To obsess about a second referendum is to put the cart before the horse,” he added. “The central issue for the next eight or nine months is what they [terms of agreement with the EU] should be. The referendum’s time will come.”

Tony Blair himself this week rowed back on his overt hostility to Corbyn, citing similar calculations.

Keir Starmer, the shadow Brexit Secretary, has warned against thinking of ways to “rub out” the Leave vote, insisting, “I don’t think we’re going to know what ‘out’ looks like at 2021 at the earliest” and stressing the need to defend UK access to the European Single Market in negotiations

Speaking at the Davos summit in Switzerland, to *Bloomberg TV*, Blair stated his belief that Corbyn is a “pro-European” politician and that he expects Labour to eventually shift its policy to staying in the EU.

“The Labour party, for reasons I understand, by the way, it’s got to say ‘well, we’re still in favour of

Brexit’—but if you see how the Labour party is moving, it’s moving it’s very much towards a ‘let’s keep the single market’ position. There’s nuance in what it says but I think at the end there is a majority in the Labour party for keeping a close relationship with Europe.”

Arguing for access without membership, as Labour does, is “a very short leap” to maintaining EU membership if that is not offered.

Addressing the presence of Labour Chancellor John McDonnell at Davos, Blair cited this as “an indication that the Labour Party has changed in a fairly fundamental way.”

McDonnell’s ostensible mission at Davos was to explain to the super-rich and the leaders of the major powers that Labour intends to implement a “Robin Hood tax” on financial transactions. But this sole concrete policy measure was framed around reassurances that he and Corbyn seek to rescue capitalism, not bury it.

He warned “well intentioned” business figures of the need to head off an “an avalanche out there of discontent, resentment and alienation ... there’s an anger building out there they need to recognise.”

There was a “moral duty” for “those who earn more and on corporations to reject tax avoidance... I think in that way there might be a potential for changing the attitude of millions of and billions of people who think they’ve not been treated fairly by the system.”

McDonnell’s appeal was heard by an audience of just 20 people.

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